

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
REMARKS TO NAVY PERSONNEL ON BOARD THE USS EISENHOWER, AS REPORTED IN
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Women integrating carrier win praise of defense chief

'It's working, and it's working well,' he says

Associated Press

ON BOARD THE USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER — The integration of women on one of the Navy's largest warships is working so well that it will be a model for putting women on nearly all combat ships, Defense Secretary William J. Perry said yesterday.

"It's past the experiment stage. It's working, and it's working well," Mr. Perry said after spending the night on this nuclear-powered behemoth, the nation's first combat ship to have women assigned full time to its crew.

There are about 100 women on the Norfolk, Va.-based aircraft carrier, with 500 scheduled to join before it begins a six-month deployment in the Middle East in October.

Includes combat pilots

The women will include combat jet pilots, cooks, bomb handlers and military police, ranging in age from late teens to mid-30s.

The ship — a floating airport with a 6,000-person crew — was conducting training exercises off the coast of Puerto Rico when Mr. Perry was aboard.

"I commend each of you for your maturity, your competence, and your can-do attitude in tackling this truly historic first," Mr. Perry told 2,000 assembled officers, sailors and Marines in the ship's hangar bay. "You have set high standards for all of those who follow you."

During several hours of briefings with the crew, Mr. Perry said, he had "seen no evidence of any problem that can't be ironed out."

Mr. Perry said that the ship has successfully built separate quarters for men and women, but that a problem still exists with putting women on submarines, given their limited space.

"But there's no reason why it can't be done, and indeed it will be done, on board all the other surface ships of the Navy," the defense secretary said.

Seven more ships in 1994

Seven more combat ships are to take on female crew this year. Women already serve on more than 60 noncombat ships.

Capt. Mark Gemill, the ship's soft-spoken commander, said he dislikes the term "experiment" in reference to the assignment of female

crew.

"The Navy doesn't need experiments with women at sea. We know how to do it, and we know how to handle the issues," he said, noting that women have served on noncombatant ships since 1978.

The process is working, he said, because women are being brought on board as jobs open up, and men aren't being pushed off to make room for them.

Yet such a revolution still has its uncertain moments, particularly in light of the Navy's searing experience with the Tailhook sexual abuse scandal and many male service members' uncertainty about how to act around women in their once-sacrosanct workplaces.

Lt. Cmdr. Jam Hambe, 35, who boarded the ship in March, recalled nearly tumbling onto a female officer as she learned to get around on the ship's steep staircases.

Afraid to touch her

The officer instinctively turned to help but stood back, afraid to touch her, when he saw she was a woman, Commander Hambe said.

She regained her footing and laughingly reassured her colleague. "I'd rather be groped" than suffer a broken leg, she said.

Commander Hambe and women interviewed said that most females on the ship are finding that the men welcome them, because many of the women have shown that they can do their jobs.

"My khakis tell them I'm a chief petty officer. I've already proven myself, so they accepted me as a shipmate," said Mary Brackett, one of the dozens of crash-helmeted figures who take care of the sleek jets that pound down the 4.5-acre flight deck.